

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Most visitors (approximately 65%) travel to Isle Royale on one of three commercial transportation services or on the NPS-operated *Ranger III*. Approximately 30% travel to the island on private boats. Most activities center around the natural environment and the wilderness character of the park and include hiking, backpacking, fishing, canoeing, boating, sailing, kayaking, diving, and observing and enjoying nature. The human history of the island and the remnants of mining, fishing, and maritime industries are also of interest to many visitors.

Isle Royale's visitors are typical of most national park visitors. They are usually highly educated and travel in family or peer groups of two to four people. They differ from visitors to many parks in that most have more experience in backcountry settings, place high value on wilderness attributes, and stay longer than visitors to most national parks (see section on visitor use numbers).

During the summer of 1996, a visitor survey was conducted to help characterize the kinds of experiences sought by visitors to Isle Royale and to determine whether or not those experiences were attained. For purposes of the survey, visitors were categorized as backcountry users (primarily backpackers, canoers, and kayakers), powerboaters (including sailboaters as a subset), and day users (some day use occurs at Rock Harbor, but most day use is concentrated at Windigo because of the daily ferry trips from Minnesota). For each user group the study identified the most popular activities, the kinds of opportunities sought, to what extent expectations were met, or problems encountered.

For backcountry visitors the most popular activities included viewing wildlife, backpacking, short walks and day hiking, photography, and enjoying NPS visitor centers. Visitors want to observe scenic beauty, enjoy a natural setting, observe and hear wildlife, and relax. They also like to satisfy curiosity, enjoy

the smells and sounds of nature, get to know the park, get exercise, and learn about nature. While no visitors reported problems that seriously detracted from their experiences, minor problems associated with noise and crowding (such as too much motorboat noise, too many other hikers in the campgrounds, difficulty finding a vacant shelter or campsite, and too many other watercraft on Lake Superior) were mentioned.

Powerboaters' most popular activities were listed as fishing Lake Superior, short walks and day hiking, motorboating, wildlife viewing, and photography. Boaters also want restorative experiences such as relaxing, observing scenic beauty, and enjoying a natural environment. They also enjoy satisfying curiosity, enjoying the smells and sounds of nature, and getting to know the park. They emphasized boating-related activities and catching fish. Similar to backcountry users, powerboaters reported only minor problems, and these were related to crowding and park conditions (difficulty finding available docking space, campsites, and shelter, restrictions on fires at some campsites, and docks in poor condition).

Sailboaters differed from other powerboaters in that they considered experiences such as tranquility and solitude and nonmotorized water activities more important. They also perceived motorboat noise in narrow harbors and bays as more of a problem than did other powerboaters.

Day users' most popular activities included visiting stores and NPS visitor centers, taking short walks and hikes, photography, taking ranger-led tours/walks, using self-guiding nature trails, and viewing wildlife. Day users reported minor problems related to not seeing the types of wildlife they expected.